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ABSTRACT

The University of North Dakota possesses an archive containing the schoolwork, writings, and artworks of 32 children. In a study, all of the fiction and poetry of three of the children were gathered, as were teachers' descriptive records and examples of the children's drawings. It can be concluded from a study of the randomly selected children that young writers express their personal perspectives and concerns in their writing. It is necessary for a teacher or researcher to read a child's story in the context of the child's other writing, and his or her whole school life. No work of art, fiction, poetry, or personal narrative is created in a vacuum. It seems entirely inappropriate to present a single story and discuss it in isolation from the author's life and other works. The knowledge gained through careful reading of children's fiction and poetry can be useful to classroom teachers. Such works are both aesthetic and expressive, and show the child's style of interacting with the world. Teachers can learn more about students by: (1) encouraging their imaginings; (2) maintaining observational journals; (3) maintaining student portfolios; (4) adapting curricula and expectations; and (5) publishing student fiction. More research should be conducted into the meanings children create in their fiction and poetry. (Three illustrations are included.) (SG)

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The Child as Author: Insights Into Acts of Meaning

by Karl A. Matz

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Grand Forks, ND

A Paper Presented at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Northern Rocky Mountain Educational Research Association

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The Child as Author:
Insights into Acts of Meaning

by Karl A. Matz
University of North Dakota

THE WRITER

by Richard Wilbur

In her room at the prow of the house
Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden
My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing
From her shut door a commotion of typewriter keys
Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff
Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy
I wish her a lucky passage.

This poem, by the former U.S. Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur presents an interesting research question. He proposes that the writing of a story is like a voyage and the "stuff" of a child's life, the cargo. As teachers and teacher educators we tend to read children's fiction, not as

the creative self-expression it is, but as a product which should fit tidily inside a conventional set of externally devised structures. Children who satisfy our expectations are said to have written "good fiction."

But fiction, for the child, is not always written with the purposes fiction normally implies. Often they write for no audience and their stories are much like the dramatic vocal play in which they engage when playing with dolls or "action figures." Such play is usually rich in dialogue, but has little narrative exposition. Don Zancanella (1988) suggests that children's fiction is often an extension of dramatic play similar to the role-playing carried out on playgrounds or back lots. One would never think of applying an external structure to such play. It is, what Edith Cobb (1977) calls "morphogenesis," an evolving exploration.

If we could but view children's fiction writing with the same questioning eye that we use to study their play, we might find the perspectives and thoughts of the child made visible in the stories. Unfortunately, few researchers have given the idea much thought. One of the seminal works on the process approach to writing in classrooms is Lucy Calkins' The Art of Teaching Writing. This is, for many, the Bible of process, methods and philosophies for the teaching of writing. However, Calkins discusses children's fiction very critically. "often," she writes, "the stories seem like rehashed television programs, told with endless detail or no detail at all."

> Children forget about focus, detail, pace and drama. They only want to cover ground, tell what happened,' teachers tell me (1986 p. 318).

Calkins then presents a brief story by an undescribed child and responds:

> I shrugged and thought "So what?"...I read several hundred stories...and in most of them I felt something was missing...I found myself saying again and again, "So what?" Their stories did not hook me or make me pay attention.

Calkins follows this by suggesting how she would teach fiction if she were to teach children again. Her first priority, she imagines, would be to convince children that they must write from their own experiences, feelings and concerns, apparently believing that they do not do so naturally. She says as much, in fact. After quoting British educator Nancy Martin, who suggests that children's stories are fables about matters that concern them, Calkins argues that this is not true of American children.

I felt Calkins was wrong; that fiction is a creative art that is most effectively learned through personal exploration and through a process of evolution. I also believed that teaching a nine or ten year old to write "good fiction" was not an urgent priority.

I had a rich resource to test my ideas. The University of North Dakota possesses an archive containing the schoolwork, writings and artworks of 32 children. The works

are organized under each child's pseudonym and stored on microfiche and colored slides. These files contain all the work created by the children between age 5 and 13. The archive is particularly useful for longitudinal historiography which cannot be accomplished on site, due to time restrictions and natural attrition.

I chose three children at random and gathered all of the fiction and poetry from their collections. I also gathered teachers' descriptive records and examples of the children's spontaneously created drawings. I studied these artifacts using the Reflective-Descriptive Method suggested by Carini (1979) and used by Anne Martin in her comparative case study Reading Your Students: Their Lives and Their Selves.

1) All available records are read many times in chronological order and recurrent thematic patterns are identified.
2) Continuities and changes within those patterns are identified.
3) The data included in each artifact is charted according to the emergent thematic patterns.
4) Each datum is inscribed under as many of the headings as possible.

As I read the stories in chronological sequence many times and reflected on the themes, settings, characters and genre, a portrait of the child, whom I had never met, began to emerge. I came to know each child in ways that even a

classroom teacher, who is with the child on a daily basis, is rarely able to do.

SUZANNE explored social relationships in her work, particularly those within the family. Many of her stories contained scenes of interaction between characters which were marked by polite conversations, sharing of food and gift giving. Food and gifts seemed to be used as ways to offer affection, and acceptance or rejection of the food often accompanied an acceptance or rejection of the individual who offered it. The value of the gift seemed less important than the mere fact that it was offered since gifts were often unidentified or of little extrinsic worth.

Throughout the collection there was a detailed and evolving portrait of the mother, her roles as parent and interactions between the mother and child. Mothers were usually the primary disciplinarian and caregiver and while they were most often influential and effective in these roles, they were not particularly affectionate or sympathetic. Gradually the portrait evolved into a more human mother who could be vulnerable, unreasonable, embarrassing and finally completely ineffective.

Teacher descriptive records showed that Suzanne was motherly and seemed to enjoy sharing food as much as she enjoyed preparing it. She was particularly well known for her dilligence when cleaning up after herself and often did more than was asked when a task was assigned. She was also quick to facilitate the activities of others, often to the

exclusion of her own creations or products. She was also described as a child with a deep insight and sensitivity to others' feelings and needs.

Teachers observed that Suzanne performed acts of kindness and service as if she considered them to be among the regular duties of life That observation can be applied to many of her themes and story elements including polite amenities, conversations, hygiene, clean ups, and food sharing. It was suggested in the study that Suzanne considered all these routine behaviors to be among the regular duties of life.

Included here are examples of her writing and art. Her drawing often featured family portraits, usually with the same configuration as her own: two girls and both parents. She employed the themes of food and gifts in many of her stories, and the two included here provide examples of how food is used as a theme.

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Two little girls wanted to surprise there daddy. So they walked over. So they hided. Their daddy slammed the door. They jumped out. They scared the daddy. They laughed and giggled. The daddy laughed and giggled, too. The mommy just went on washing dishes.

The daddy said, "Why can't we have some cake?"

The two girls said, "Why don't we?"

The mommy said, "Why can't I have some cake?"

"Mom, you can. Sit down, why don't you," said the two little girls. (6.42 1/3/78)

"Suzanne" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives
c The Prospect Center for Education and Research, North Bennington, VT

This story starts at their house. The little girl went out one day. The little girl saw something and it was a bear.

"Rrrrrr," said the bear.

"Oh, no," said the girl. "What should I do?" she said to herself.

"Rrrrr," said the bear. He was a nice bear. The bear loved the little girl. The girl gave the bear some food. The bear just loved the food. It was meat. The meat had mold on it.

"WOW!" said the bear, "This is better than regular meat." The girl thought that was really nice.

"Good-bye," said the girl.

"Good-bye," said the bear, "I would if I were you. I would go to school," said the bear.

"Alright," said the girl.

So she went to school. At school she did drawing. At worktime she did writing. Then she went home.

"Where have you been?"

"I went to visit the bear."

"WOW!" said the mommy.

The End (7.25 3/5/79)

"Suzanne" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives
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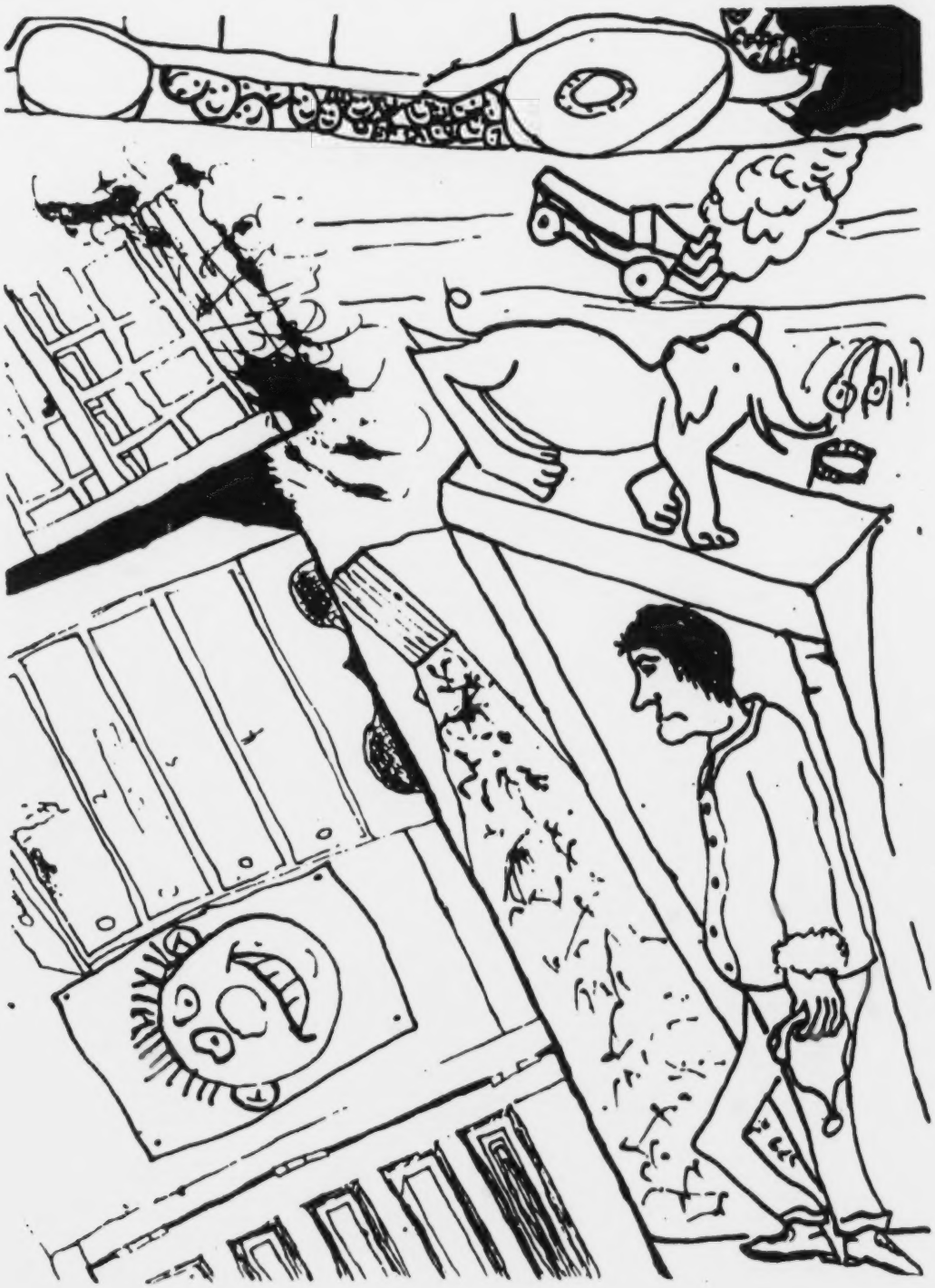
PAUL seems to have explored beyond the boundaries of convention in his fiction and poetry. He employed a wide diversity of themes, genre and styles which makes his collection appear to be most eccletic. He was familiar with the conventions of story craft and interpreted the conventions freely. He wrote a variety of stories with scenes of logical and spatial incongruity. He explored the extremes of several gamuts including conflict and cooperation, violence and compassion, surrealism and realism and death and rebirth. He did not seem bound to use a specific genre, nor did he seem bound by the constraints of the genre he did select.

Paul's settings and characters were as diverse as his themes and genre. He created medieval wizards and dragons, but gave them unconventional characteristics. He created anthropomorphic characters, personified objects and imaginative creatures. His stories and characters were from the past, the present, the imagined future, or they existed in lands Paul created which were neither Earthly nor of outer space. They were, instead, fantasy lands.

Teachers observations revealed that Paul was a child with diverse and far reaching perspectives which caused even mundane things to fascinate him. He was a nonconformist in his interests and clothing and seemed to test the limits of discipline. He became tense around rigid structures and routines, seeming to over emphasize the apparent requirements. He seemed more comfortable when the activity

provided him the freedom to interpret and explore.

Art and writing provide such freedom, and the examples of Paul's work included here demonstrate his diverse and far reaching perspective. The drawing seems to bring together a disparate list of items into a single whole, and this is equally true of the story of the "pointy alligator." The second story is a medieval fantasy featuring anachronisms and unconventional descriptions.



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Once upon a time a pointy alligator went pop! Except the two little points. They went together and turned into a pin.

A fat lady was taking a walk with a long finger nails, which was a disaster! Because when she had an itch she would cut herself with her finger nails.

Two hours later she was sitting on a giant sarcastic looking zipper. It was then that she saw the pin.

POP! (10.12)

"Paul" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives
c The Prospect C-nter for Education and Research, North Bennington, VT.

Legend of the Rainbow Dragons

This story takes place in the land of fantasy and adventure, where, if you know how to find it, there's a place where anything can happen!

Once upon a time (as stories always say in the beginning), there lived a purple DRAGON! Now, on this particular day, this particular dragon was lying on his very own beach towel, which was about the size of an ocean liner, on his private beach in the land of Gnorl (-norl).

The purple dragon had been tanning himself everyday for the past four months, and now he was the deepest, richest purple you could only find in a land of fantasy and adventure. After a few hundred years the dragon got bored of just tanning himself all the time.

So one day he set out into that land of adventure and excitement to try and find another dragon, whether it was purple or not.

Before the dragon could set out, a party of adventurers came to him. First, there was a wizard, then there was a warrior, then there was a monk, then there was a thief and last, but not least, there was a witch doctor. The dragon wanted to burn them all up but they pleaded with the dragon and the dragon said that he would let them live as long as they would help him find at least one more dragon and they agreed.

"Paul" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives. c The Prospect Center for Education and Research, North Bennington, VT.

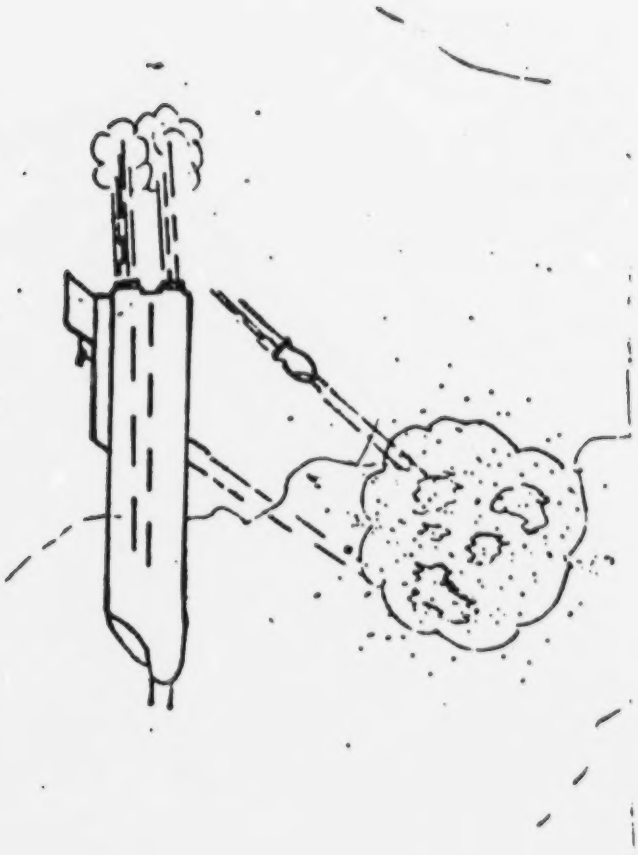
GREGG's work seemed to begin with a solid format or structure and showed gradual variations over time. Some of his fiction and poetry followed identifiable structures and formats, using borrowed characters which appeared repeatedly. Yet Gregg did not limit his explorations to these self-imposed restrictions. He gradually explored variations on his themes.

His "three character tragic ending" story formula provides an example. Although the formula was used many times, when the works were viewed chronologically they revealed a gradually evolving narrative perspective which takes the reader gradually more deeply into the thoughts of the antagonists and the fates of the protagonists. He also offered subtle changes in characters, themes and plots and used the formula once in a completely different genre. Overall it appears that Gregg found a certain security and reliability in structure and well-established characters, and used them as a springboard to explore his own writing.

Gregg's teachers said he over-relied on external structures and could be very upset when a routine was disrupted. He seemed uncomfortable around transitions and with unfamiliar adults. He tended to practice skills he had already mastered, and seemed reticent to attempt new activities or to employ new media. He was rather well-known for his reluctance to "try new things" and even wrote a poem explicitly expressing his fear of failure. However once he became familiar with a routine, he would begin to explore

the possibilities until the next new or unfamiliar setting or routine was encountered. His teachers observed that he had to be required to try new activities or media, but once he mastered it, he would often select the once unfamiliar activity on his own.

The rigidity his teachers described is clear in his art and writing as well. He discovered the ruler at age eight, and rarely drew without it thereafter. The four poems offered were written about the same time and follow a structure so similar from one to the other that one may think they are stanzas of the same poem. He never wrote in free verse. The story included here is an example of the many works Gregg created with borrowed characters, in this case from a then-popular television program. The suggestion that Gregg feared failure is not merely speculation. He expressed that concern in another poem, which is included here. Note again the careful meter and rhyme structure.



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One day I went down to the sea
To see what I could see.
I saw a little mermaid
But she turned and swam from me.

One day I saw a herd of gulorts
Coming right at me.
I tried to run
I tried to hide
I tried to get a horse to ride.
I got one and began to ride.
But the gulorts caught up and
Got my hide.

One day I saw the Incredible Hulk
Running right at me.
I turned and ran
But he caught up
And ran right over me.

One day I saw some silons
Coming right at me.
I picked up a rock and threw it,
But they turned and shot at me.

"Gregg" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives. © The Prospect Center for Education and Research. North Bennington, VT.

I never knew

What I could do

Until I tried to do it.

I tried it and

It didn't work

And then I got mad and blew it.

(9.76 11/17/78)

"Gregg" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives.
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Once upon a time the Galactica was passing over Zuse. Suddenly an army of spaceships attacked. Suddenly the bridge door burst open. OOOOOH! In the doorway stood musclemen with guns. They weren't men, they were robots with muscles. One of them pulled out his gun and shot Adam. Apollo drew out his gun and shot at a robot. It bounced off!

"They're not Silons." said Apollo, "Drop your guns, everyone. We're done for."

"So the Galactica was caught by these robots. A year went by, living with these robots, which was not the pleasantest thing. The only person they seemed to like was Boxy. They liked him because he liked them. Bit by bit everybody made made friends." (9.93 11/78).

"Gregg" The Reference Edition of the Prospect Archives.
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It can be concluded from these studies of randomly selected children, that young writers do express their personal perspectives and concerns in their writing. It is necessary for the teacher or researcher to read the child's story in the context of the child's other writing, and his or her whole school life. No work of art, fiction, poetry or personnal narrative is created in a vacuum, and it seems entirely inappropriate to present a single story and discuss it in isolation from the author's life and other works.

Recommendations for the Classroom

The knowledge gained through careful reading of children's fiction and poetry can be useful to classroom teachers, and there are valid reasons for seeking such knowledge.

> Since a child's works, like our own, are both aesthetic and expressive, showing us that child's style of interacting with the world, they are valuable insights to both the child and the world for the classroom teacher, and time and space need to be provided to enlarge the opportunities children have in school to engage in this activity (King, 1987, p. 14).

Classroom teachers often lack the time and perhaps the inclination to engage in the extensive data collection and narrative description contained in this study. That should not present an obstacle, however, because such is

unnecessary. Classroom teachers already possess a great deal of knowledge about the children they teach, including information about the child's home and family, social interactions, behaviors, interests and idiosyncracies. However, teachers who are interested in pursuing a similar kind of child study may wish to take note of a few simple recommendations.

1) Encourage Their Imaginings

In many classrooms there is little time devoted to activities which permit free expression. Even in Art, an activity that seems to be entirely creative, much time is spent replicating a model, and in many classrooms the result of the Art lesson is 25 works which are more or less replications of the work created during the demonstration. Teachers occasionally struggle with the question "What should we do for Art this week?" It would be advisable to simply provide materials and let the children explore their potential. A few experiences might be necessary before children trained to "reproduce" will feel comfortable "producing," but once they begin to do so, the teacher will begin to gather useful and informative data.

Opportunities for free expression are also recommended in the writing workshop. Emphasis on story form, appropriate detail, description and dialogue can rob the children of their creativity, just as our earlier emphasis on mechanics had done. Martin (1989) has made a similar

observation.

> It is not surprising that in many classrooms of teachers newly converted to "the writing process," the suggestions and recommendations gleaned hastily from workshops and books are followed to the letter with excessive zeal and punctiliousness, far beyond what was intended originally by the pioneers in the field. The result can be a reformed program just as rigid as the one discarded, though presented with currently approved language and trappings that give the appearance of enlightened change (p.21).

When the writer's workshop approach is applied to the writing of fiction, difficulties often arise, as Calkins (1986, p. 318) has observed. The process often falls apart because fiction is a different kind of writing compared to personal narratives. It is not bound by the same constraints for format and quality, and does not fit the same agenda. Since the story does not originate in memory, as personal narrative does, but originates instead in the imagination, it is far more difficult to write. Furthermore, fiction does not thrive in the chains of format, but becomes stilted and lifeless.

When children are given the freedom to write they often turn to fiction writing. It is the kind of story they most often read and the kind of story they see most often on the screen.

It is recommended, therefore, that children be given opportunities to compose freely, without restraints. Peer conferencing, revision and editing will certainly remain, but the teacher needn't require conventions of "good fiction" as proposed by some education writers (Calkins 1983 & 1986; Taberski 1987). There is no real reason for the apparent urgency in much of the literature to design approaches to teaching "good fiction" writing.

So, while the writer's workshop approach to writing personal narratives is certainly recommended, it is further recommended that children be given frequent opportunities to write freely without the "quality controls" imposed in a writer's workshop.

> Let us maintain our respect for the complexity of children's feelings, and the ambiguity that remains at the heart of any creative work. We need to give children space and time in which to experiment freely with writing, to produce unrevised and throw-away efforts as well as undeveloped sketches (Martin, 1989, p. 4).

2) Maintain observational journals

In the day to day classroom experience, children often "fall through the cracks" and, if nothing imperative presents itself, may receive only a pauper's share of the busy teacher's attention. Even the outgoing child may be misunderstood and approached inappropriately. A great deal of knowledge about the child can be gained by periodically

recording salient observations. Isolated events will often emerge as integral to the child's style and will add to the knowledge the teacher already possesses. A certain investment of time is required, but the benefits are well worth the investment.

3) Maintain student portfolios

The child's fiction and poetry, artwork, and school papers, together with periodic narrative observations and other evaluations can be kept in a chronologically sequenced collection. Portfolios are recommended by both Wolfe (1988 & 1989) and by Jongsma (1989). Portfolios can be used in addition to, or in place of the regular quarterly evaluation. The maintenance of the portfolio is in the hands of the child, for the most part, but teachers confer with the child periodically to encourage self-assessment.

Wolfe offers several caveats.

> Portfolios are messy. They demand intimate frighteningly subjective talks with students. Portfolios are work. Teachers who ask students to read their own progress in the "footprints" of their works have to coax and bicker with individuals who are used to being assessed... Why bother?...The answer lies in the integrity and the validity of the information we gain about how and what students learn (p. 37).

The kinds of information contained on report cards are

fairly ambiguous, particularly the evaluations of non-academic areas such as "effort" or "citizenship." A teacher may have a valid reason for awarding a "check" rather than a "check-plus" but may not be able to articulate the reason effectively to the parent.

The teacher who maintains portfolios has an excellent tool for communicating in ways that are useful and informative for the parents and for designing authentic curricula. The portfolio, as Jongsma and Wolfe describe it contains any examples of the child's work that the child may wish to include. There may be lists of books read during the year, works of art, reports, fiction, summaries of parent conferences, descriptive observations and creative writings. The portfolio is, in many ways, similar to the archive maintained at Prospect School and, like those archives, it provides a wealth of useful information which enables teachers to make informed decisions about the specific child.

Children's spontaneously created fiction and poetry are an important part of a complete portfolio. As suggested by the present study, these works provide information and clarify issues that might otherwise remain undisclosed or unclear. The teacher's narrative review of the writing should accompany the works in the portfolio. They bind the seemingly disparate works into a single unified whole.

4) Adapt curricula and expectations

The information available through portfolio

assessment, periodic narrative observations and narrative reviews of fiction and poetry should provide an impetus for the creation of authentic curricula. The information should also be useful for meeting the child's needs, encouraging personal growth and approaching the child in appropriate ways.

The issues for each child will be different, but the findings of the present study should provide illustration. Gregg seemed to find comfort in rigid, predictable routines, while Paul seemed to over-emphasize the expectations and become tense and nervous. A caring teacher could provide an open and supportive classroom environment that meets the needs of both Paul and Gregg. Expectations can be clearly stated, but explicitly flexible. For example, one may demonstrate a method for solving long division problems, but allow students the freedom to develop their own strategies as well. Some children will rely on the model, but others will already possess or will create a different approach. This is an example of what is meant by "authentic curricula."

Deeper knowledge about the child's style and perspectives is also useful in interactions with the child. The teacher that understands the way that Suzanne expressed her affection and friendship, will know how to reciprocate. It would be easy to misinterpret Suzanne's intentions, and to fail to realize that her actions originate in her perceptions of "how nice people behave." The knowledgeable

teacher will realize that gracious acceptance and encouragement will strengthen the teacher-student relationship and open doors to deeper understanding. This is an example of what is meant by "approaching the child in appropriate ways."

Any classroom population will be comprised of children with unique and diverse perceptions and styles. Suzanne, Paul and Gregg provide examples of how perceptions and styles are made visible, and the method of "seeing" employed in this study can be useful to teachers who wish to know their children more fully and provide for them more appropriately.

5) Special Publication of Fiction

Publication in the writer's workshop refers to the variety of ways that final drafts are made available to an audience. It is recommended that spontaneously created works of fiction and poetry be published in a special way, to acknowledge the special nature of the works. Any of the standard publishing methods will suffice, such as the creation of books, display in a hallway or on a bulletin board and shared reading with younger schoolmates. Whatever method is employed, it is suggested that fiction and poetry be published in a way that is different from the method used to publish personal narratives and expository writing.

One fourth grade teacher binds the works into a single monthly anthology and provides copies for the school library and the classroom, while the personal narratives hang on a

length of green yarn in the hallway. This attests to the special, but still appreciable nature of the works. The anthology might be given a special title such as "In Our Own Write" or "Storytime Showcase" with consecutive volume numbers for each collection.

Suggestions for Further Research

The method employed in this study can be useful to other researchers as well. The creative composition of middle and upper elementary students has received little attention in the literature. What little treatment does exists tends to have its focus on instruction or evaluation. More research into the meanings children create in their fiction and poetry needs to be undertaken.

One might, for example, undertake a comparative, multiple case study with different genders, or differences within the gender as a focus. There are many topics concerning the way that boys and girls are are socialized, and much that remains undisclosed about the impact such socialization has on personal empowerment. Do girls, for example, tend to write stories of home and family? What are the differences between girls who do and those who write action and adventure stories? Can these differences be accounted for?

One might also investigate the writings of children with sensory impairments such as hearing or vision. How do severely hearing impaired children convey personal meaning

in their writing, and how do their perceptions appear to be different and similar among the subgroup and among other normally hearing children?

Research into the personal meanings conveyed in children's fiction and poetry can be undertaken among other seemingly cohort groups as well. For example, how do the children who are non-native English speakers represent their world? What perceptions are expressed by children of various minority cultures? One might also study the the writings of children from various socio-economic groups, children from various family configurations and children with a variety of physical handicaps.

One might also study the writings of children with various non-medically diagnosed labels such as "learning disabled" or "emotionally disturbed." I do not personally accept the use of non-medical diagnoses of cognitive processing functions, but schools often group such children together, away from the regular classroom. This seems to imply that the school, at least, considers them to be members of a cohort group.

How do children with the same label represent their perspectives? How do these perspectives differ among children with the same label? Can ethnographic and historiographic research such as that undertaken in this study help teachers and administrators make more informed decisions about curricula and methodologies?

Teachers and researchers have a long tradition of

grouping children according to externally designed criteria. Like gardeners, we arrange children into rows and apply labels for all to see. Children who seem to fit none of the classroom groups are weeded out and placed elsewhere. Sometimes, however, what appears to be a weed is really an exotic flower that needs only special nurturing to come to full flower. Teachers who really understand the children they teach will be equipped to do more than simply wish them "a lucky passage," They will be equipped to light the way.

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